
Part 2

Public Policy Challenges Facing the Human Services System

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Every successful family faces the future. Young parents plan for their children's education. They plan for their retirement, and for the eventual decline in their ability to care for themselves. They even plan beyond their own lives, for the sake of the family members who will inherit what they leave behind.

Successful societies also face the future. They plan for the education of all children, for the retirement of elders, and for the well-being of future generations. They plan for the care of people who are ill or disabled, for the protection of the vulnerable, for the treatment of ill health and injury, and for the alleviation of poverty.

Still, turning our backs on the future is a common failing. It is easier to focus on the present, or to dwell on the past. It is more comfortable to stick to old habits – even unhealthy habits – than to face the future consequences of what we are doing.

For Washington's human services system, the need to avert these failings is urgent. Sticking with the status quo is simply not an option, because we cannot sustain today's services given rising health care costs and rising demand. Moreover, other trends – the trend towards community-based care, for instance – require that we re-think what services people need, and how government, families, employers and communities can work together to provide them.

This is the work of all citizens. These are not problems that can be solved by technical experts or budget wizards; they are issues that define who we are, what kind of society we live in, and how much we really care about each other.